

# **Mercer County Workforce Investment Board**

## **Three-Year Strategic Plan 2014 - 2017**



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**A. Unified Workforce Investment Plan Values, Priorities and Strategy Alignment**

In the fall of 2011, the Mercer County Workforce Investment Board (WIB) developed a local three year Strategic Plan for 2011-2013. This plan, presented in draft form and disseminated for comment, was brought before the full Board for approval in January 2012. This plan which is outlined below has been updated to incorporate Core Values outlined in the SETC Unified Workforce Investment Plan for 2014-2017. Under the framework of the Unified Plan Values, Priorities and Strategy Alignment, the Mercer County Workforce Investment Board has addressed the following:

- a. **Core Values:** Identifying strategies on how investments are best utilized based on industry needs and engagement with the business community;
- b. **System Priorities and Populations:** Addressing how local programs and services are integrated to support the service to WIA customers and priority populations outlined in the Unified State Plan;
- c. **Sector Strategies – Key Industries:** Mercer County’s alignment to incorporate the seven key industries identified by the State as growth sectors (1) Healthcare, (2) BioTechnology (Life Sciences), (3) Financial Services, (4) Advanced Manufacturing, (5) Transportation, Logistics & Distribution, (6) Technology & Entrepreneurship and (7) Hospitality, Tourism and Retail

**B. Local Demographic, Governance and Planning Process**

1. Summary of Local Area Planning and Planning Process

Mercer County’s updated Strategic Plan has incorporated tenets set forth in the 2014-2017 Unified State Plan and interlaced it with recommendations to expand the capacity and efficiency of our local workforce system. Sections of this plan will include the following:

- Demographic data highlighting economic/educational contrasts within the county;
- An overview of strategies, programs and training services aligning workforce initiatives with key growth industries predicted to fuel the economy in the coming years;
- A review of the process determining oversight scope of the system, measurement and evaluation of businesses and job seekers alike;
- A discussion of best practices and challenges faced by the workforce system in policy guidance and operations;
- Integration of Mercer County’s 2011 Strategic Plan with SETC 2012-2017 Unified Workforce Investment Plan and Core Values

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The Mercer WIB held its initial strategic planning meeting in August, 2011 comprised of volunteer members of the Board for the purpose of developing a local strategic plan for 2011-2013. Two stakeholder meetings were scheduled in August 2011 and September 2011. Both meetings were led by Dr. Patricia Donohue, President of Mercer County Community College.

The first meeting (the discussion stage) centered on extrapolating information provided by EMSI Labor Analysis Report and monthly reports disseminated by LWD Bureau of Labor and Market Information.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the first meeting consisted of a discussion regarding the identified growth sectors and how these applied to our local area. Further discussion centered around the relevance of existing workforce development initiatives and how accurately they prepared the workforce on all levels. From the first meeting, key questions emerged such as how to leverage limited resources on creating a productive workforce, how to integrate those needing additional assistance that are not prepared to enter the workforce and why it is imperative the WIB position itself to become the repository for businesses to share their employment needs.

The second meeting, which moved beyond the discussion into the planning stage, enabled a draft to be drawn containing significant points characterized as five “emerging essentials.” These essentials were:

- **Essential I:** Identify elements that will ensure successful branding and imaging of the Mercer County WIB in the region;
- **Essential II:** Identify key industries in the Mercer County region that characterize occupation growth opportunities where county citizens may realize full time employment;
- **Essential III:** Increase and strengthen communication and collaboration regarding employment requirements and prospects between the county WIB and regional employers;
- **Essential IV:** Formulate workforce improvement initiatives to provide long-term skills training that meet the staffing needs of regional industries in partnership with education, businesses, local agencies and community organizations;
- **Essential V:** Develop and revise intensive job readiness training that includes but is not limited to work ethics training, job skill awareness, and soft skills.

## 2. Overview of Local Workforce System Program Service Area

Mercer County is the local workforce service area discussed in this plan. As New Jersey’s capital county, Mercer County is a part of the Trenton-Ewing, NJ Metropolitan statistical area as well as the Delaware Valley combined statistical area. Located midway between New York

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<sup>1</sup> The demographic and labor market data was gathered from two sources; an economic overview by EMSI (Economic Modeling Specialist International ([www.economicmodeling.com](http://www.economicmodeling.com)) and updates from NJLWD.

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City and Philadelphia, Mercer County boasts 12 municipalities that are home to more than 366,513 residents in 226 square miles with 10% of the United States population all within a 75-mile radius and is the 11<sup>th</sup> most populous county in the State. In the 2010 United States Census, Mercer County saw an increase of 15,752 (4.5%) from 350,761 recorded in the 2000 Census.<sup>2</sup>

Mercer County has a highly educated labor force primarily due to the county being home to top educational institutions such as Princeton University, Rider University, The College of New Jersey, Thomas Edison State College and Mercer County Community College. This higher skilled workforce has helped keep our local unemployment rate consistently lower than state and national averages as well as rank Mercer 9<sup>th</sup> in median household income throughout New Jersey.

Another positive is Mercer County's transportation infrastructure widely considered to be excellent. Key turnpike corridors run through the county that connect easily to New York and Philadelphia as well as quick access railway networks. Air travel has also been expanded in the county with Frontier Airlines serving the Trenton-Mercer Airport. Launched in the spring of 2013, Frontier has added five additional nonstop destinations, resulting in a total of ten U.S. destination locations.

### 3. Alignment with Priority Populations/Demographics of Population Served

Although Mercer County can boast higher than average median household incomes, Mercer County is also home to an extremely challenged municipality, the City of Trenton, that possesses disproportionate poverty in relation to the rest of the county. While Hightstown and Ewing both have poverty rates close to the national (13.8%) or state average (9.1%), neither municipality reaches the levels found in Trenton. According to the 2006-2019 American Community Survey, almost one quarter of Trenton's population have an income level below the federal poverty line of 24.5%.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, unemployment data gathered from the 2008 US Census showed the City of Trenton had a total population of 82,883 with 61,854 of its residents sixteen years of age or older. This population reported unemployment rates for ages 16+ at 14%; 16-19 at 40%; 20-24 at 21% and 25-44 at 11.3%. The Census further reported 55.70% living below the poverty level with 41.60% living below the poverty level. Trenton individuals living below the poverty level, or earning less than \$10,000 stood at 15.50% and residents earning \$10,000 - \$14,999 was 10.10%.

In the last decade, immigration has also played a significant role in Mercer County. U.S. data collected from 2000 and 2010 point to substantial growth in the Asian and Hispanic/Latino populations, particularly in the municipalities of Hamilton and Hightstown with Trenton seeing the largest Hispanic population. The increase in this demographic has also created the need for additional literacy services, particularly for residents seeking ESL instruction prior to entering the workforce.

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<sup>2</sup>Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000; Census 2000 Summary File, United States Census Bureau

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 2006-2010 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

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A unique feature of Mercer County is vast differences found from one municipality to another in income, housing, employment and educational attainment. Unfortunately this contrast causes greater challenges in terms of strategic development and resource investment in preparing all levels of job seekers entering the workforce.

#### 4. Governance of Workforce Area

The Mercer County Workforce Investment Board falls under the purview of the Office of Economic Development and Sustainability. Potential WIB members are vetted through the Office of the County Executive with final approval coming from the Board of Chosen Freeholders.

The Mercer County WIB meets on a quarterly basis (January, April, July and October) and operates as the policy making arm of the One Stop system. As mandated by law, standing committees are:

- Literacy
- Disabilities Issues
- Youth Investment Council
- Oversight (One Stop)

Boosting adult literacy levels is an essential element in workforce preparedness. As such, the Literacy Committee meets monthly to receive and review updates from adult literacy educators who teach Adult Basic Education, ESL and Civics. Mercer County also convenes a consortium of adult educators from various community agencies receiving funding under the Title II Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. Both committees meet monthly to ensure our local literacy system continues to meet required benchmarks and performance measures.

The WIB is also responsible for creating and maintaining an active Youth Investment Council. This committee, which also meets monthly, assists the One Stop in developing policies to ensure that a comprehensive plan is in place that will adequately prepare the county's in-school and out-of school youth for future employment.

The Disabilities Issues Committee, also mandated by State law, meets bi-monthly and is charged with ensuring that services for individuals with disabilities are integrated into the One Stop system. The mission of this committee is committed to ensuring that the needs of our disabled community are met through universal access and integrated services within the system.

The Oversight Committee meets quarterly to review reports and updates from the One Stop Operator regarding vendor performance and benchmarks achieved at the One Stop. This committee also functions as the policy making arm of the WIB that will in turn bring recommendations before the full Board for vote.

Although not mandated by law, the Mercer WIB has a very engaged Healthcare Committee that meets bi-monthly. The development of this committee was based on this sector's contribution to the local economy and subsequent employment opportunities predicted for this area in the coming years.

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The overall role of the WIB is clearly outlined by the State Employment Training Commission (SETC) however the Mercer County WIB periodically reevaluates its way of doing business to ensure the Board is operating as efficiently and effectively as possible.

#### 5. Summary of Planning Process

As stated above, the initial planning process began in 2011 with the development of the 2011-2013 Strategic Plan. The current plan, encompassing 2014-2017, is an incorporation of the essential elements identified in 2011 infused with the State's Unified Workforce Investment Plan.

Based on industry projections and identified core values (driving investments based on industry needs, meeting jobseekers where they are, equipping the workforce for employment and increasing system accountability), these values are encompassed in the strategic connection interlaced in the updated plan.

In 2011 a select group of WIB members met to examine EMSI Labor Analysis and LWD data to ascertain growth industries more closely aligned with the local economy. From this discussion five essentials were developed: (1) identification of elements that ensure successful branding and imaging positioning the Mercer County WIB in the region; (2) identification of key industries that characterize occupational growth opportunities; (3) increase and strengthen communication and collaboration between the WIB and regional employers regarding employment requirements; (4) formulate workforce improvement initiatives partnering education, businesses and community organizations to identify long term skills training (5) develop and maintain rigorous job-readiness training not limited to work ethics, job skill awareness and soft skills.

Using the same framework along with integrating elements of the State Unified Plan, the committee reconvened on November 12, 2013. A draft of this updated plan will be initially reviewed by the ad hoc committee prior to being shared with the full Board for review/comment ten days prior to the next scheduled Board meeting. Simultaneously the plan will be posted on the Mercer County for public comment for one month.

The 2014-2017 Strategic Plan will be brought up for vote before the full WIB for their approval on January 28, 2014.

#### 6. Business/Stakeholder/Partner Engagement

There have been ongoing processes to convene Advisory Councils at Mercer County Community College (MCCC) and the Mercer County Technical School (MCTS) with an eye toward strengthening existing partnerships with local businesses. Recently more focus has been devoted to aligning curriculum development and forging partnerships with the Talent Networks.

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### C. Resource Investment Strategies, Programs and Services

Responsiveness by our partners to state labor markets, specifically the seven Talent Networks, remains essential. Training for entry level positions and programs that offer stackable credentials create opportunities for new job seekers or those seeking a career change.

The Continuing Education Department of Mercer County Community College recently offered Introduction to Automation Using Programmable Logic Controllers (PLC), a certificate course directly in alignment with the advanced manufacturing sector. Falling within the technology sector, MCCC is offering IT Risk Management/CyberSecurity, Web Design, Graphic Designer, Developer/Program, Microsoft Office Program and Cisco Network Training Module Certificates.

Healthcare has consistently been one of the leading growth sectors statewide as well as in our local. A **Trenton Times** article, “*Report: N.J. Hospitals Added \$20.4 Billion to Economy in 2012*,” reported: “Trenton area’s five hospitals, which include University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro, produced \$1.25 billion for the local economy, employed 6,990 full-time workers and spent \$132 million on services last year, including \$70 million for contracted labor.”<sup>4</sup>

To stay current with demand and align with this growth sector, MCCC has three Allied Healthcare Certificate courses offered: Phlebotomy I & II (with an externship at Robert Wood Johnson Hospital-Hamilton) along with a 76-hour course to earn a Home Health Aid certificate. This certificate is advantageous for a segment of jobseekers who want to immediately start work as a Certified Home Health Aid since it does not require a prior Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) license. However if a jobseeker wanted to stack this credential with 10 additional hours of training, this presents an opportunity for employment in either a long term care facility or private home. Other certificates within the healthcare sector offered at MCCC include Clinical Development & Regulatory Affairs, Computed Tomography, Medical Billing & Coding, ICD 10, Pharmacy and EKG Technician and Ophthalmic Assistant.

The Mercer County Technical School also aligns curriculum to meet demand in growth sectors. Courses offered in Transportation, Distribution and Logistics take place at the Sypek Campus for Automotive Collision, Automotive Technology Fundamentals & Diesel Technology.

In the Hospitality and Tourism sector, the Sypek Campus offers Baking and Dining Services along with a hands-on Culinary Arts Program which has consistently catered very successful on-site events over the past years. Numerous certifications are also available under the auspices of the growth sectors.

It is important to note the development of MCTS’s Healthcare Academy sprung directly from the Mercer County WIB Healthcare Committee and its review of occupational trends and data. After review of data and material disseminated from LWD, it became evident the Healthcare sector was positioned be one of the leading growth sectors in the region. Similarly, the LWD

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<sup>4</sup>Jenna Pizzi, “Report: NJ Hospitals Added \$20.4 Billion to Economy in 2012,” *Trenton Times*, November 20, 2013, pg. 1

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Office of Research and Information predicts from 2010 to 2020 it is projected that more than 61,700 jobs will be added statewide to the healthcare sector (or an annual increase of 1.3%).<sup>5</sup>

Responding to projections and data pointing to continued growth in healthcare, in September, 2011 the Technical School began a full-time, four-year Health Science Academy. The Health Science Academy, which has rapidly gained notoriety since its inception, has partnered with Mercer County Community College to enable students to earn up to 21 college credits by their senior year. The Academy currently has ninety-three students enrolled and is affiliated with local hospitals, research centers and private practitioners. Due to the success of the Health Sciences Academy, discussion to open other Academies directly aligned with the Talent Networks has already begun taking place.

Also under the umbrella of the Mercer County Technical School is the Health Careers Academy. The Health Careers Academy is a post-secondary facility offering training in healthcare careers with more than 40 clinical affiliations offering training in Licensed Practical Nursing, Part-time Practical Nursing, Medical Assistant, Healthcare Technician, Massage Therapy, Electrocardiography and Venipuncture.

#### **D. Measurement and Evaluation**

In light of the various partnerships and collaborations constituting the day-to-day operation of the One Stop Career Center, it was determined that the WIB's focus would be to evaluate one key element of the overall system. Since WIA funded programs are evaluated through a standard system of Common Measures that evaluates customer attainment after training, performance measures are first negotiated between USDOL and the SETC before being applied to local regions. The Mercer WIB Oversight Committee agreed that one of its functions would be to set a minimum standard for placement rates for Individual Training Accounts (ITA) only, an allowable policy under the purview of the local area. In March, 2013 the WIB Oversight Committee agreed to recommend to the full Board that effective immediately all training related placements be set at a minimum standard of 60%. Specifically, the common measure must constitute at least 60% training related placements for adults based upon the 80% set by USDOL.

The Board further approved that if an ITA vendor consistently does not meet this goal, the One Stop can place the vendor on notice that funding may be discontinued. It was further agreed that placement information that has been gathered over program years can be shared with vendors, customers and the WIB. This recommendation was voted upon and approved at the July, 2013 full Board meeting effective for PY 2013.

#### **E. Best Practices and Challenges**

Best practices include many of the examples cited above; the addition of training available at Mercer County Community College and the Technical School directly related to Advanced Manufacturing, Healthcare, Hospitality and IT. Not to be overlooked is a best practice directly related to Veterans' Services at the One Stop Career Center. The Employment Services Division

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<sup>5</sup>*New Jersey Key Industry Clusters*, NJ Department of Labor and Workforce Development (Office of Research and Information)



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of the One Stop was selected and received an Employment Service Local Office award from the American Legion in honor of the outstanding work performed with veterans. The Office was recognized at the 2013 95<sup>th</sup> Annual State Convention that took place in Wildwood, NJ. Mercer County Community College has also recently hired a Veteran's coordinator; this is a definite positive for direct services for the veteran population in our local.

The Mercer WIB was able to produce two videos in 2013 from funding provided by a State Employment and Training Business Development Grant. The purpose of one video, geared for the business community, was designed to create awareness of issues and challenges facing people entering the workforce and those desiring a career change. The video also offered suggestions how businesses could partner with local educational facilities by encouraging employees to upgrade literacy skills if so desired. The second video targeted the student population and stressed the importance of improving literacy skills through adult education; it also provided information about available resources in our local. Further, the video recommended ways people could segue into post-secondary education and highlighted examples how each educational attainment was directly correlated to improved economics.

To reach our high school youth, this fall the WIB hosted its first Annual Mercer County Youth Symposium. The purpose of the symposium was to introduce local youth (primarily juniors and seniors from all school districts) to the seven Talent Networks to guide their employment and/or post-secondary objectives. The format was designed for students to receive first-hand information from the Talent Network Coordinators so they can receive specific information from each sector, i.e., education and skills needed, hiring trends, potential wages.

The building of best practices and their achievements are valuable and should by no means be minimized, particularly in how they enhance the operation of the One Stop system. Vendor performance accountability, however, should be viewed as a definite milestone particularly in terms of its significance to the successful preparation of the jobseeker.

In discussing challenges confronting Mercer County, examples can be characterized as either being “internally controllable” or “not controllable.” Transportation continues to be one of the steadfast challenges in our local that Mercer has attempted to manage. Data gathered for the *Mercer County Human Service Transportation Coordination Plan (June 2007)* showed that there are substantial gaps in service for the indigent, the disabled and senior populations. Top rider locations are spread across the county and public transportation access is not even; this certainly impacts jobseekers and their access to employment opportunities particularly at off-route locations and access to later work shifts. To alleviate problems inherent with limited transportation the County provides transportation services managed by the WIB. Through a matching grant with the federal government called the Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) grant, a shuttle service is provided by a private vendor along the Route 130 corridor. Since there has never been public transportation along this route, this service was specifically designed for jobseekers seeking employment from the numerous businesses, hospital and shopping centers along this stretch.

Adult literacy and workforce preparedness is another ever-present challenge that continues to affect our local. The Adult Literacy Consortium is extremely challenged to keep up with

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demand of residents seeking adult basic education as well as ESL. In light of the fact this is the last year for the current GED test, Mercer County's two testing centers have been inundated and unable to keep up with demand. Unfortunately many GED testers are not adequately prepared and immediately sign up to be retested; most likely because of all the uncertainties surrounding the new GED effective January 1, 2014. New Jersey does not plan to announce the new GED vendor(s) until December 2013 which places adult educators in an extremely difficult position. How can they prepare GED test takers without knowledge of new tests, their format, materials or costs? This issue presents a much larger question, how will we be able to assess the impact of those who will choose to give up and never take the new test?

WIB membership and engaging representatives from the business community is another challenge. Core Value 3 *Equipping the Workforce for the Future*, has been widely discussed by the SETC as a means to strengthen the collaboration between businesses and educational institutions. To this end, the ideal composition of the WIB would include representation from local Talent Network businesses committed to rolling up their sleeves and working collaboratively with local colleges to ensure their training programs are aligned with industry needs. Opportunities to strengthen relationships with these businesses should continuously be pursued. Collaboration, especially without input from Talent Network Coordinators, poses more of a difficulty. Without this collaboration opportunities that may be present for jobseekers can be delayed or missed entirely. Part of the issue is the misconception that still exists among local businesses, that most jobseekers trained through the One Stop are ill prepared and lack a desirable work ethic. To this end, gaining trust and engaging businesses to consider the One Stop as a repository for their employment needs continues to be a challenge.

### **Core Value 1: Driving Investments Based on Industry Needs**

Core Value 1 *Driving Investment Based on Industry Needs*, is closely aligned with Essential IV (formulate workforce improvement initiatives in partnership with education, businesses, local agencies and community organizations to identify long-term skills training that meet the staffing needs of regional industries). Points covered under this essential were approved by the Mercer WIB and include the following:

- Position the Workforce Investment Board as a primary repository where regional businesses share information on workforce needs;
- Conduct multiple roundtables annually that bring together members of key industries to update the WIB on workforce needs including skills and staffing levels;
- Develop connections to youth development opportunities that enhance focus on workforce preparation;
- Collaborate with organizations to identify, develop and offer training responsive to emerging jobs and position categories in the workforce;
- Develop connections to adult literacy opportunities;

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- Develop resources and connections to serve special populations including disabilities and veterans.

As commitment to these points has been ongoing, future goals over the next three years include continued outreach to businesses and creating awareness in identified growth sectors. Making stronger connections and marketing One Stop services will also continue. Also to be noted is the development of a WIB Business Integration Committee which is currently in the planning stage.

**Core Value 2: Meeting Jobseekers Where They Are**

Core Value 2 finds alignment with Essential II (identify key industries in the Mercer County region that characterize occupation growth opportunities where county citizens may realize full-time employment). Points correlating with this core value include:

- Institute dashboard indicators that report key elements that will provide direction regarding training and employment readiness requirements for prospective employees;
- Establish processes that facilitate a data-gathering list of regional industries and skill-level requirements;
- Design and implement a process that ensures rapid response to changes in the needs of Mercer County;
- Prioritize industry clusters to form “business teams” which will allow the Workforce Investment Board to capitalize on additional training and resource allocation;
- Launch a committee to facilitate diversity for Workforce Investment Board involvement.

Efficient service delivery to jobseekers and employers alike remain a WIB priority. In order to ensure that Mercer County’s fully develops its local labor force, the WIB will continue to work with employers, institutes of higher education, training facilities and community based organizations. The WIB will also continue making strides to better identify service gaps present in surrounding municipalities and develop a plan to address these problems, i.e., literacy issues, gaps in transportation, engagement of out-of-school youth, challenges faced by the long term unemployed and assessing the needs of veterans. Further, the WIB will begin preliminary discussion about the feasibility of a One Stop satellite program (based on population needs in the Hightstown/East Windsor municipality) in the near future.

**Core Value 3: Equipping the Workforce for Employment**

Core Value 3 closely correlates to Essential III (increase and strengthen communication and collaboration regarding employment requirements and prospects between the County Workforce Investment Board and regional employers). Points aligning with this core include:

- Develop a communication plan with a focal message that links regional employers to the WIB as the workforce employment service provider for the greater Mercer County area;

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- Develop procedures to optimize the use of electronic and social media to ensure maximum impact with employer recruitment;
- Identify the strategies and special initiatives that employers are using to recruit prospects;
- Affirm the use of mutually understandable language and terminology.

Continued collaborations with local Chambers of Commerce and the Talent Network Coordinators are both essential to equipping the workforce. Strengthening and leveraging relationships with local businesses in growth sectors and our educational institutions shall continue to be a priority.

Unfortunately, low literacy levels continue to be a barrier for many jobseekers. The WIB will continue marketing and promoting the two literacy videos that were produced; in particular the video geared for students stressing the importance of upgrading literacy skills and educational attainment. The second, that targets businesses, creates overall awareness of literacy issues and offers suggestions of how local businesses can forge partnerships with educational institutions to be part of the solution. The WIB will enlist assistance from the local Chambers of Commerce to help distribute the videos as well as place a link on the county website.

Monthly there are roughly 3,000+ county residents using the Route 130 shuttle for their transportation needs. At the beginning of 2014 the WIB will begin marketing One Stop and literacy services, pamphlets listing local resources as well as free books (on all levels) on each shuttle.

#### **Core Value 4: Increasing System Accountability**

WIA and Wagner-Peyser programs are both held accountable to standards set by Common Measures. Beyond implementing a policy setting a minimal acceptable standard (i.e., 60% vendor performance rate), each local is bound by standards set by USDOL and the State. Although system accountability is a priority with other One Stop partners, there is a widely held belief that all partners should evaluate their successes based on common measurable outcomes.

The WIB Oversight Committee will proceed in its role as a mechanism to assist the One Stop in assessing local programs ensuring their alignment with labor market needs. This committee will continue to meet quarterly making certain all resources that support the Workforce Investment system are carried out as expeditiously and efficiently as possible.